

## PROGRAM BRIEF

# CAHPS®: Assessing Health Care Quality from the Patient's Perspective

The mission of AHRQ is to improve the quality, safety, efficiency, and effectiveness of health care by:

- Using evidence to improve health care.
- Improving health care outcomes through research.
- Transforming research into practice.

### Introduction/Background

The many facets of health care quality can be divided into two major categories: one involves the clinical aspects of care, while the other reflects patients' experiences with health care services. The challenge posed by the second category is to capture and report on those experiences in a way that is meaningful and useful to consumers, clinicians, and health care administrators.

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) has been the lead Federal Agency in developing and distributing standardized, evidence-based surveys and related tools for assessing patients' experiences with the U.S. health care system. The Agency's Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (CAHPS®) program has become the focal point of a national effort to measure, report on, and improve the quality of health care from the perspective of consumers and patients.

### Overview of the CAHPS Program

AHRQ launched the CAHPS program in the mid-1990s. Working with a national team of public and private research organizations known as the CAHPS Consortium, AHRQ developed and refined a set of principles that has driven the development of all CAHPS products:

- **Emphasis on actual experience.** While CAHPS surveys include both ratings and reports of experience, the emphasis is on respondents' reports of their experiences with health care—resulting in information that is more specific, actionable, understandable, and objective than general ratings alone.
- **Standardization.** Survey tools and reporting measures are standardized, which allows for valid comparisons and benchmarking across health care settings.
- **Use of the best science.** The development of CAHPS surveys and related tools incorporates the state-of-the-art in survey and report



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design. Thorough field testing ensures that survey administration guidelines and protocols are based on sound evidence of effectiveness and feasibility.

- **Meaningful information.** To ensure that surveys generate information that has meaning for consumers and other audiences, the CAHPS Consortium tests the language and formatting of survey instruments and reports elements with various audiences to maximize comprehension and usability.
- **Input from all affected parties.** The survey development process includes frequent opportunities for major stakeholders, including clinicians, administrators, and accrediting bodies, to learn about the instrument and provide feedback.
- **Public resource.** All CAHPS tools, resources, and services are in the public domain. Technical assistance, including general guidance as well as project-specific advice, is available to all users at no charge.

The program was originally launched as the Consumer Assessment of Health Plans Study. In the first 5 years, known as CAHPS I, the Consortium succeeded in building an integrated set of carefully tested and standardized questionnaires and reporting formats for consumers enrolled in health plans. Consumer reporting was a major focus of work during that stage of the CAHPS program.

The Agency built on that progress with CAHPS II (2002-2007). During that time, the Consortium did the following:

- Conducted research and developed products that meet the needs of patients receiving care at various levels of the ambulatory care system and from facilities such as hospitals, nursing homes, and dialysis centers.
- Investigated ways to improve the usefulness and appropriateness of CAHPS instruments for vulnerable populations within American society.

## The CAHPS Consortium

The CAHPS Consortium is comprised of Federal agencies and private research organizations. AHRQ works closely with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), which has funded the development of several of the CAHPS surveys. Other agencies involved in CAHPS include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research.

The private researchers include national experts in survey development, quality assessment and improvement, and reporting. In the first generation of CAHPS, the grantees were Harvard Medical School, Research Triangle Institute, and RAND. For CAHPS II, AHRQ funded 5-year cooperative agreements with the American Institutes for Research, Harvard Medical School, and RAND. For CAHPS III, the Consortium includes the Yale School of Public Health (previously referred to as the Harvard team) and RAND.

AHRQ also contracts with Westat to support the work of the Consortium and assist users of CAHPS products through the CAHPS User Network. Westat also manages the National CAHPS Benchmarking Database.

- Explored a variety of ways to support the use of survey results to monitor and improve quality of care.

In June 2007, the Agency launched CAHPS III. In this third stage, the focus of the CAHPS program has shifted from the development of surveys to the development of tools and resources to support the use of CAHPS surveys. In addition to continued refinement of the family of CAHPS surveys, AHRQ has charged its grantees to develop and test ways that organizations can use CAHPS data for

quality improvement and to develop reporting methods that will support both consumer choice and quality improvement in health care organizations.

## CAHPS Family of Surveys

The CAHPS family of surveys includes instruments for assessing the quality of care in both ambulatory and institutional settings. Each product includes questionnaires, administration protocols, analysis programs, and guidance in reporting results.

### Surveys for Ambulatory Care

CAHPS is best known for its Health Plan Survey, which has become the industry standard for obtaining consumers' assessments of their health plans. The CAHPS Health Plan Survey is used by commercial, Medicaid, State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), and Medicare plans representing more than 120 million enrollees.

Results of these surveys are used for public reporting, accreditation, quality monitoring at the Federal and State levels, and quality improvement at the plan level. The National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) incorporates CAHPS results into its health plan performance reports as well as its accreditation process for health plans. A version of the survey is also used by CMS, which surveys Medicare beneficiaries enrolled in managed care plans as well as in the traditional Medicare program, and reports the scores in a public Web site.

During CAHPS II, the Consortium developed surveys that assess the experiences of health care consumers in various ambulatory settings, including physician offices, managed behavioral healthcare organizations, dental plans, and tribal clinics. These instruments blend the standardization and scientific rigor that CAHPS surveys are known for with the flexibility and depth of

## Population-Specific Surveys

CAHPS surveys can be adapted for specific populations whose experiences may be different from those of the general populations. The Health Plan Survey, for example, includes a set of items for children with special health care needs as well as one for adults with mobility impairments.

CAHPS surveys may also be used to capture the experiences of a specific ethnic or cultural group. For example, in collaboration with the Choctaw Nation Health Service, the Consortium developed a survey that addresses the needs and experiences of American Indians.

information that users have requested. Ambulatory care survey products include complete, standardized survey instruments as well as optional supplemental items that may be added to specific instruments.

For more information about the CAHPS Ambulatory Care Surveys, visit [https://www.cahps.ahrq.gov/content/products/PROD\\_AmbCareSurveys.asp](https://www.cahps.ahrq.gov/content/products/PROD_AmbCareSurveys.asp).

### Surveys for Facility Care

CAHPS products include several instruments to assess patients' perspectives on the care delivered in health care facilities, such as hospitals, nursing homes, and dialysis centers.

During CAHPS II, two facility surveys were released for public use. The CAHPS Hospital Survey, often referred to as H-CAHPS or Hospital CAHPS, focuses on the experiences of adult inpatients with hospital care and services. Hospitals across the country are using this survey and voluntarily reporting data to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). The CAHPS In-Center Hemodialysis Survey is designed to help dialysis facilities and End Stage Renal Disease (ESRD) Networks assess and improve



the experiences of patients receiving hemodialysis.

During CAHPS III, the Consortium will complete the CAHPS Nursing Home Surveys, which include instruments for long-term residents, recently discharged short-stay residents, and the families of residents.

For more information on the CAHPS Facility Surveys, visit [https://www.cahps.ahrq.gov/content/products/PROD\\_FacilitiesSurveys.asp](https://www.cahps.ahrq.gov/content/products/PROD_FacilitiesSurveys.asp).

## Resources for Survey Users

AHRQ offers all users of CAHPS surveys a variety of free services to guide and support them in implementing the instruments, interpreting the results, and using the information to meet their needs. The two main vehicles for providing these services are the CAHPS User Network and the National CAHPS Benchmarking Database.

### CAHPS User Network

The CAHPS User Network is the principal source of CAHPS survey products, information about CAHPS-related products and services, technical assistance for survey users, and networking opportunities for users and researchers. The User Network is funded by AHRQ and administered by Westat.

Through the User Network, users of CAHPS survey products and results have access to:

- **Free technical assistance.** Users can ask questions through a toll-free number (800-492-9261) and e-mail address ([cahps1@ahrq.gov](mailto:cahps1@ahrq.gov)).
- **A comprehensive, easy-to-use Web site.** The CAHPS Web site ([www.cahps.ahrq.gov](http://www.cahps.ahrq.gov)) provides comprehensive information on the CAHPS program and its products:

- Free product-specific *CAHPS Survey and Reporting Kits*, which include the questionnaires, reporting measures, administration protocols, analysis programs, and instructions for using the programs.
- Information about CAHPS products at various stages of development and testing.
- Free resources to support the implementation of a survey project, the public reporting of survey results, the use of CAHPS surveys to improve quality, and the translation of CAHPS surveys.
- A searchable FAQ and bibliography.
- Information and materials developed for CAHPS events, including Webcasts and national User Group Meetings.
- Resources designed to support users in identifying and networking with other organizations that are doing similar or related work.
- **Updates on products and services.** In addition to the Web site, the CAHPS User Network sends occasional announcements as well as *The CAHPS Connection* to keep users informed about product development, upcoming events, and changes to existing instruments. If you would like to receive these updates, subscribe at [https://subscriptions.ahrq.gov/service/multi\\_subscribe.html?code=USAHRQ](https://subscriptions.ahrq.gov/service/multi_subscribe.html?code=USAHRQ).

## National CAHPS Benchmarking Database

To enhance the value of a national standardized survey, AHRQ has worked closely with Westat to develop the National CAHPS Benchmarking Database (CAHPS Database). This database, which contains over 10 years of data from commercial and Medicaid plans, has become the national repository for data from the CAHPS Health Plan Survey. In CAHPS III, the CAHPS Database will develop a database for the CAHPS Clinician & Group Survey as well.

The primary purpose of the CAHPS Database is to facilitate comparisons of CAHPS survey results by survey sponsors. Sponsors that participate in the CAHPS Database can:

- Receive reports that compare survey results to benchmarks derived from the database (i.e., reference points such as national and regional averages).
- Access data from individual surveys.
- Order customized analyses and reports on a fee-for-service basis.

The CAHPS Database also offers an important source of primary data for specialized research related to consumer assessments of quality as measured by CAHPS surveys.

For more information about the National CAHPS Benchmarking Database, visit

[https://www.cahps.ahrq.gov/content/ncbd/ncbd\\_Intro.asp](https://www.cahps.ahrq.gov/content/ncbd/ncbd_Intro.asp).

## For More Information

To learn more about the CAHPS program and its products and services, visit [www.cahps.ahrq.gov](http://www.cahps.ahrq.gov).



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